

“Marxist and Functionalist Theories in the Study of Stratification”: A Comment

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During the past few years we have seen a number of unsuccessful attempts to reconcile the differences between conflict and functional paradigms of social stratification. The most recent attempt by Theodore Kemper in *Social Forces* should be applauded for its fresh approach and originality. But there is a serious problem with his suggested empirical assessment. Unless it can be shown that those high in the stratification system have *not* had a hand in shaping a consensus regarding an ideal distribution of rewards, any convergence found between the actual and the ideal distributions will remain unconvincing.

Kemper failed to document another partial line of agreement between Marxists and functionalists. Both acknowledge that something like value consensus may exist. They differ, of course, over the causal order between values on the one hand and power on the other. To be sure, as Miliband (181) points out, Marx was never specific on exactly how the ideas of the ruling class are given legitimacy. But the past few years have brought several useful attempts to explain how the acceptance of inequality is shaped (for example, Aronowitz; Giddens; Miliband; Mueller). Kemper, as if in an afterthought, finally adds in a footnote (n, 15) that an attempt to use this argument against the functionalists represents a “suspicious omniscience” on the part of the Marxists. After only citing the existence of some contrary evidence, Kemper concludes in this footnote that “this is certainly a refutation of false consciousness, at least with regard to the evaluation of working-class occupations.”¹ The point I would like to stress is that if we are to respect both sides of the debate, and therefore develop an empirical assessment that both sides can accept, we cannot brush aside an argument one side views as significant. For, one party will withdraw from the game on finding that the deck is stacked in favor of its opponent.

There is, of course, a more deeply entrenched problem that attempts like Kemper’s must face. The structural–functional and Marxian positions are not simply theories but competing social scientific paradigms. Thus, specific hypotheses drawn from these general paradigms which fail to find adequate empirical support will usually be propped up by what Thomas Kuhn (78) calls “numerous ad hoc modifications.” It is only when these ad hoc modifications become so cumbersome on one side of the debate that the paradigm will be abandoned.

In conclusion, we face a long road of paradigm conflict in the analysis of social stratification. But the more adequate our research strategies, the shorter this road may become. We must be cautious not to present one side with an easy out if the empirical consequences are not in its favor. The problem I have noted in Kemper’s article makes this a likely outcome. Kemper’s approach can lead us in promising directions. But until the issue of differential access to the legitimation process is resolved, his suggested research will prove inadequate.

NOTE

1. I would like to add that the problem with Kemper's suggested empirical assessment is not adequately conveyed by the "false consciousness" concept. The Marxian idea of false consciousness implies that while the theorist knows the true interests of the working class the working class itself does not. Whether or not the true interests of the lower classes are opposed to those of the upper class, the important point here is the extent to which those in favored positions can influence the "ideal" pattern of rewards.

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